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Rebecca L. Lipstein and K. Ann Renninger

Interest for Writing: How Teachers Can Make a Difference

Although interest plays a large role in motivation and confidence, we need a clearer understanding of how teachers and classroom practices can influence students' interest for the act of writing. Rebecca L. Lipstein and K. Ann Renninger studied the perceptions of 178 students in grades 7, 8, and 9 to develop this understanding. They offer characteristics of students in four phases of interest and describe instructional approaches to meet students' wants and needs.

W

hen English teachers dream, we dream of interested writers. They are the students who invest themselves in writing, who carefully consider the structure of their arguments, who care about crafting a sentence. When we look around our classrooms, however, we find a mix of students, only some of whom are interested in writing.

Although we would love to see all students become interested writers, we rarely think of them as being *taught* to love writing. Instead, we tend to view interest as immutable, as something with which only a lucky few are born. This conception of interest is not supported by research, however, nor is it what students themselves describe. When they talk about their writing, students say that their interest for writing is often influenced by their teachers and classroom practice.

In this article, we describe the perceptions of 178 seventh, eighth, and ninth graders at an academically oriented K–12 school¹ about what makes them want to write and their approaches to writing. We identify the characteristics of students in different phases of interest for writing and examine their wants and needs as writers.² We then consider how to work with an understanding of student interest in our approach to writing instruction.

Why Interest Matters

Interest for writing³ affects the ways that students approach writing and the results they achieve (Hidi and Renninger; Renninger, Ewen, and Lasher).

Research on writing and motivation indicates that students who have an interest for writing are more likely to set effective goals, make use of helpful strategies, and seek feedback as they work with writing tasks (Lipstein and Renninger). As early as 1913, John Dewey noted that students who are interested in a subject are more likely to feel confident about their work in that subject and exert effort that does not feel effortful (see research confirmation in Hidi and Renninger). Students with an interest for writing are also more likely to develop a sophisticated understanding of what writing is and the possibilities that it can afford (Lipstein and Renninger). In short, an interest for writing is associated with the behaviors that teachers most value in student writers.

Four Phases of Interest Development

Hidi and Renninger's review of the interest research provided the structure for our identification and analysis of student interest for writing. They identified four phases in the development of student interest based on this review: only a triggered situational interest (Phase 1), a maintained situational interest (Phase 2), an emerging individual interest (Phase 3), and a well-developed individual interest (Phase 4). They reported that students' interest does develop and deepen if they are provided with support by others, such as teachers. They also noted that, if interest is supported to develop, students have increased attention, set and meet goals for themselves, and are more effective in their use of learning strategies.

In our study, each student's current phase of interest was identified based on his or her responses to a questionnaire that assessed knowledge of, value for, and feelings about writing. Students were also asked about their feelings of self-efficacy for writing, effort as writers, feedback preferences, and involvement with writing both in and out of the classroom. A subsample of 72 students (38 boys and 34 girls), who were selected based on phase of interest, gender, and school year, also participated in in-depth, structured interviews. Data from questionnaires and interviews were summarized to describe shared characteristics of students in each phase of interest for writing (see fig. 1). This information should help teachers of writing recognize these traits in their students and begin to identify their current phases of interest for writing.

Students in Phase One

Phase One students described writing as "a boring exercise" or "something you have to do, but I hate it." Even though they did not devote as much time to writing assignments as their peers, these students said that writing was "a lot of work." They felt that they were bad at writing or didn't know much about it, and they expressed a desire for concrete feedback and instruction. They liked opportunities to make choices about writing topics but tended to make minimal revisions to their writing because they were unsure how to work with their teachers' comments. These students also said that they hated peer conferences because they felt intimidated by their peers' expertise and unable to offer useful advice.

FIGURE 1. Identifying Students' Phase of Interest for Writing (Adapted from Lipstein and Renninger)

Phase One Students

- Do not think they know much about writing and do not think they are good at writing
- Think writing is a lot of work
- Do not revise much, mostly out of confusion about how to approach the task
- Like feedback that feels specific and manageable
- Dislike peer conferences because they feel unable to critique others' work

Phase Two Students

- Think of writing as something that must be "done right" to please the teacher
- Put work into their writing but no more than they put into other assignments
- Revise in an effort to incorporate teachers' comments
- Like feedback when it tells them how to do things "right"
- Like peer conferences but don't use them as they were intended; work near partners, not with them, and consult teacher a lot

Phase Three Students

- Think of writing as an art form and consider themselves writers
- Gladly spend time working on writing projects, both for school and for personal enjoyment
- Revise a great deal, mostly to "make it sound right"
- Dislike feedback when it feels like the commentator is trying to tell them how to write; appreciate recognition of their work
- Dislike peer conferences for the same reasons they are skeptical of feedback

Phase Four Students

- Think of writing as a craft; think they are good writers but also have an awareness of their place in the greater writing community
- Gladly spend time working on writing projects, both for school and for personal enjoyment
- Revise a great deal to improve content, structure, style, and mechanics
- Welcome all constructive feedback; get frustrated when only praise is offered with no suggestions for improvement
- Appreciate peer conferences, but only if they feel constructive

Students in Phase Two

Students in Phase Two approached writing as they would any other school activity: as something to be “done right,” according to the teacher’s specifications. Even though they wrote focused and organized essays, these students had a limited understanding of writing and were not concerned with developing their voice in writing assignments that they completed for school. As one girl put it, “If I have to write something for someone else or for a class, then I need some guidance on what they want. I’m not writing for me—it’s not what *I* want—it’s about what my English teacher wants.” These students appreciated feedback from their teachers and worked hard to address teacher comments in their revisions. They enjoyed peer conferences but tended to interact very little with their partners, preferring to ask their teacher for guidance.

Students in Phase Three

Students in Phase Three considered themselves writers and described writing as “where I can go to be free” or “a really fun thing when you rule what happens to everything you write about.” Their most striking characteristic was their confidence. These students were certain they knew about writing; they sometimes even thought that they knew more than their teachers. They indicated that writing was fun, not work, and generally engaged in painstaking revision, citing “making it sound right” as their primary concern. They wanted to hear praise for their work, and information about its impact on an audience. As one ninth-grade boy said, “what really speaks to the reader is what I enjoy to know about.” He also wanted his audience to tell him “whether or not it sounds too similar to other authors,” demonstrating a concern for individual voice that was expressed by many students in this phase. These students disliked peer conferences, either because their partners focused on grammar and “missed the point” of their work or because suggestions from peers—and teachers—threatened to interfere with their writing style.

Students in Phase Four⁴

Students in Phase Four described themselves as happy to spend hours planning, writing, and revis-

ing. Like students in Phase Three, they were enthusiastic and described themselves as writers. Like students in Phase Two, they were concerned with “doing it right,” though they defined “right” more broadly, as including both personal and more universally accepted standards of excellence. Students in Phase Four demonstrated a greater ability than their peers to evaluate and employ constructive strategies for improving their work. Their concerns for revision went beyond “making it sound right” to include critical attention to grammar, structure, and content. While they often received praise for their writing, they preferred constructive criticism: one student said that, while his friends had told him a piece he had written was “great,” what he wanted to know was, “How can I make it better?” Phase Four students typically welcomed peer conferences as another means to get feedback on their work but sometimes lamented that their partners did not give them the constructive criticism they desired.

To support the development of interest, teachers can make use of students’ current wants as writers to provide them with the feedback that they need to hear.

Supporting Interest Development: How Educators Can Make a Difference

The students that we spoke with also offered us insight into ways that we might support the development of their interest for writing. Their comments suggested that activities that support interest development balance a respect for students’ current feelings about writing with the development of new writing skills. When students described an experience that deepened their interest for writing, it always contained a balance of meeting their wants and needs as writers. Conversely, when students described an experience that lessened their interest for writing, it was clear that their wants and needs had not been met.

While all students indicated a desire to be heard, they also described wants and needs more particular to their phase of interest (see fig. 2).

It is worth noting that the needs of students in one phase become the wants of students in the next phase (Renninger and Lipstein); as students develop greater interest for writing, they learn to enjoy what was once hard for them. To support the

FIGURE 2. Students' Wants and Needs by Phase

Phase of Interest	Students' Wants	Students' Needs
One	To have people understand how hard writing is for them; to have writing feel easier	To receive a limited number of concrete strategies and suggestions for how to approach writing
Two	To receive concrete suggestions for how to write	To be encouraged to find their own voice as writers and move away from a conception that the teacher's way is the only "right" way to write
Three	To express themselves and let their voices be heard; to do things their own way	To temper their enthusiasm for their way of doing things with a broader awareness of audience expectations and writing conventions
Four	To please both themselves and a wider audience by demonstrating a balance between their personal standards for good writing and more widely accepted standards	To continue to be challenged to improve and continue to receive constructive feedback on their writing

Reprinted with permission from Renninger, K. A., Lipstein, R. L. (2006), "Come si sviluppa l'interesse per la scrittura: cosa vogliono gli studenti e di cosa hanno bisogno?" [Developing Interest for Writing: What Do Students Want and What Do Students Need?], *Età Evolutiva*, 84: 65–83.

development of interest, teachers can make use of students' current wants as writers to provide them with the feedback that they need to hear.

For example, several Phase One students liked writing less in middle school than they had in elementary school because the analytical emphasis in the higher grades was more challenging. Many of these students also described assignments that had asked them to outline, ostensibly to help them improve as analytical writers. Some of these students said it was bad enough having to write the paper once and wondered why anyone would make them write it twice. Others, however, such as one ninth-grade boy we interviewed, found outlining to be a revelation. The difference for this boy seemed to be that he was *taught* to outline, and his teacher told him that this technique would make it *easier* for him to write. By giving the student step-by-step instructions—what he needs—and phrasing them in terms of making writing easier—what he wants—this teacher was able to give an uninterested writer a good writing experience and help him approach essays more like a student in Phase Two.

Balancing students' wants and needs as writers appears to encourage students in all phases of interest to begin taking on the characteristics of writers in the next phase. For instance, when we asked one Phase Three student to describe a good writing experience, he talked about a day when he

and several friends had decided to write a story together for fun. He said that they decided to write "our idea of how a story should be written, where we would pass off according to dialogue statements and segments so that we would all have our own say in what our characters would be doing. . . . We thought that it would actually feel like true dialogue . . . not one person talking to himself." This experience appears to have appealed to the student's Phase Three desire for creative control. However, when asked about why this experience had been so valuable, he replied, "I think this was one of the most entertaining ones, where I learned the most about how I should—could best convey my ideas." Here, he acknowledges that the experience also gave him something he needed as a writer: feedback from his peers about how to make his writing accessible to a reader. This concern for audience expectations and more universal standards is characteristic of students in Phase Four.

In their interviews, students made it clear that if a writing experience is to help them develop a deeper interest for writing, it must feel like an opportunity that meets their wants *and* needs. If a teacher tries only to tell students what they need to hear, students shut down because they are not ready to work with this kind of feedback. If a teacher focuses only on what students want to hear, it is similarly unproductive; while these students may

enjoy having their desires catered to, without the kind of feedback they need, they are not likely to grow as writers.

How Might Interest Become a Part of Writing Instruction?

A knowledge of students' interest for writing and their wants and needs as writers can position teachers to support the students to develop and/or deepen their interest for writing. Classroom practices that balance a respect for what students want to hear with what they need to hear can support students to become more interested writers. These practices might include individualized feedback, small-group activities, or whole-class instruction.

Individualized Feedback on Students' Papers

Because they are by nature individualized, written comments on student papers lend themselves well to customization for student interest. Once we have identified a student's phase of interest for writing, it is possible to work with what that student wants to hear about writing to provide feedback that the student needs.

For example, Phase One students want feedback that contains concrete suggestions (e.g., "Tell me why this quotation is important to your thesis" or "Move this clause here to make this sentence read better"); this type of suggestion feels manageable and makes writing seem easier.

For Phase Two students, concrete suggestions may be less productive, because these students are likely to accept suggestions unquestioningly, which interferes with the likelihood that they will develop their voices as writers. They are better served by feedback in question form (e.g., "Why did you choose this quotation?" or "You seem to be saying . . . Is that what you mean?"). These questions challenge them to think of writing as a series of choices that they can make.

For Phase Three writers, the challenge is to provide feedback that they are not likely to dismiss as intrusive or contrary to their style. Their desire to impress an audience can be useful in this regard; instead of writing "awkward," which they can dismiss as a stylistic preference, it is more useful to provide feedback to Phase Three students in the form of audience response (e.g., "I like how this

sounds, but I'm not entirely sure what you mean—could you make this clearer for me?"). Phase Three students are less likely to dismiss this type of comment because it does not imply anything negative about their writing style or provide prescriptive suggestions.

For Phase Four students, it is important to balance praise for specific aspects of their writing with constructive suggestions for improvement that challenge them to stretch and grow as writers.

Peer Conferences

Interest can also inform how we work with students in group activities, such as peer conferences. There was widespread dislike for peer conferences among the students we interviewed, and much of their discontent seemed to stem from groupings that were assigned without regard for their phase of interest for writing. It seems that their teachers were inclined to pair stronger writers with weaker ones to provide support for the weaker writers. Our discussions with students suggested that this was an unproductive strategy because students in different phases of interest conceive of writing differently and are not likely to be able to discuss their writing in mutually beneficial ways. Pairing students who are in the same phase, however, could be productive because they would be more likely to address each other on an equal level and provide feedback that their partners might be willing to accept.

Classroom practices that balance a respect for what students want to hear with what they need to hear can support students to become more interested writers. These practices might include individualized feedback, small-group activities, or whole-class instruction.

Whole-Class Instruction

It is also possible to provide whole-class lessons that work with the wants and needs of students in different phases of interest for writing. The following lesson on awkwardness provides an example of how a whole-class lesson might support students in each of the phases of interest for writing. It was identified by the students to whom it was taught as the most useful lesson of the semester.⁵

The lesson began by asking students if they had ever been frustrated by comments such as

FIGURE 3. Tips for Writing Clearly (Adapted from Williams)

- **Strive for concision.** If something can be said in five words, why use fifteen?
Example: Frankenstein is a man who believes he can defeat the forces of nature.
Revision: Frankenstein believes he can defeat nature.
 - **Avoid passive constructions and implied subjects.** Sentences are clearer if they have a clear subject.
Example: The examination of this passage is important to the understanding of the work.
Revision: To understand the work, we must examine this important passage.
 - **Avoid nominalizations.** Keep verbs as verbs; don't turn them into nouns.
Example: The planning and preparation of the party took almost a week.
Revision: It took almost a week to plan and prepare for the party.
 - **Avoid separating subject and verb.** Long breaks between subject and verb can be distracting and disorienting.
Example: Hamlet, although he vows revenge, is more a man of words than actions.
Revision: Although he vows revenge, Hamlet is more a man of words than actions.
 - **Get to the verb quickly.** If you can count ten words without reaching a verb, revise!
Example: The work of a writer who chooses to use long noun clauses for the subject of his or her sentence may prove difficult to read.
Revision: When writers use long noun clauses as the subjects of their sentences, their writing is difficult to read.
 - **Use position in sentence for emphasis.** The end of the sentence has more emphasis than the beginning. Put important information (such as a new point) at the end of the sentence, and place less important information (such as a point you've already made) in the beginning.
Example (no emphasis): Laertes dies at the end of *Hamlet*. So does Gertrude.
Revision 1 (emphasis on Gertrude's death): Just as Laertes dies at the end of *Hamlet*, so does Gertrude.
Revision 2 (emphasis on Laertes's death): Just as Gertrude dies at the end of *Hamlet*, so does Laertes.
 - **Avoid the "he or she" problem.** Use plural nouns so you can use *they* instead.
Example: The reader finds him- or herself sympathizing with the hero.
Revision: The readers find themselves sympathizing with the hero.
Or, even better: The readers sympathize with the hero.
-

"awkward." The students all agreed that they had. "It's too vague," said one. "What does that mean, anyway?" asked another. The teacher then offered to help them decode what teachers often mean when they write *awkward* and provided them with a list of concrete suggestions for avoiding awkward constructions (see fig. 3). The goal of this list was to demystify style, which is often one of the most elusive aspects of writing for students. After reviewing these guidelines with the class, the teacher asked the students to apply them to a paragraph written by the editor of the short-fiction anthology they were using in class. The students ripped the editor's work to shreds and produced paragraphs that were much more effective and concise.

This lesson appealed to Phase One students because it provided them with concrete guidelines that made a hard concept easier. It also allowed them to apply these guidelines to writing that was not their own, and therefore not as fraught with anxiety. For Phase Two students, the guidelines seemed to provide a comforting roadmap for how to "do things right." In the application exercise, however, these students were challenged to be critical of an authority figure's writing and to hear multiple revisions of it, which upset the notion that there was "one right" approach. For Phase Three students, the enjoyable part of this exercise was picking apart the expert's work and finding that it sounded better in their words. Because they

were required to use the guidelines in their revision, however, they also saw firsthand that these guidelines worked, and they were more likely to adopt them in their writing. Finally, the lesson appealed to Phase Four students because it allowed them to incorporate new techniques that they might not have tried in their writing and enabled them to further develop their repertoire of writing strategies.

An Interesting Approach to Writing Instruction

We agree with Roger Bruning and Christy Horn that it is important to speak to students to best understand how to work with student writers. When we talked to students, they told us that interest for writing matters and, more importantly for teachers, that student interest is directly influenced by writing experiences in the classroom.

An understanding of the characteristics of students in each phase of interest helped us to identify students' interest for writing in our classrooms. Once we knew more about their current phases of interest, we also knew what they were likely to want and need as writers and could use this information to support their interest for writing to develop. We have found that, as their interest develops, they are likely to acquire more-sophisticated approaches to writing and feel good about their abilities as writers, which leads them to want to reengage with writing and to seek our input. Our data and our experiences suggest that if we as educators can bring an understanding of interest to our teaching of writing and create writing experiences that meet the wants and needs of student writers, then we can make a difference.

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Notes

1. Because of the more-privileged demographic of our population, our results may not generalize to students in less-privileged academic settings.

2. This discussion builds on those reported in Lipstein and Renninger and Renninger and Lipstein. Interested readers are encouraged to consult these articles for more detail.

3. In the interest literature, interest is described as a product of the interaction between a person and a particular content (e.g., writing). The term *interest for writing* is used here to denote that interest is an interactive process; interest is not located in the writing itself, but in the interaction between the writing and the writer. When we discuss interest for writing, we are speaking of an interest for the act of writing, not interest for a particular topic or assignment.

4. Out of the 178 students in our study, only four of them were Phase Four students, and all of these students were in the ninth grade.

5. This lesson was designed by Rebecca L. Lipstein and taught to tenth graders at Germantown Academy.

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